

Hebrews 12:18-29

“You Have Come To Mount Zion”

June 5, 2022

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Pentecost Sunday

Next Sunday we will return to our normal Summer practice of preaching through the psalter, beginning next week with Psalm 54.

But today, this Pentecost Sunday in the year of our Lord 2022, we will explore together on the most important passages in all of the Scriptures on the theme of Christian worship - Hebrews 12:18-29.

In this passage, the apostle describes what is now different in the new epoch initiated by the Ascension of Jesus Christ the Son of God to his Father's right hand as our High Priest. What is different, according the apostle, is that we now, by the power of the Spirit, enter into heavenly places in our worship - through Jesus and his Ascension and poured out Spirit - we enter directly into the presence of God.

In other words, in Jesus - we do not stand outside and admire the fire from a distance - no, in Jesus, Christian Lord's Day worship is to enter into the consuming fire of God.

Listen now to God's holy and inerrant word from Hebrews 12:18-29. It is printed on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to read along.

*18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the*

*assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

*25 See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. 26 At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." 27 This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

*Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

The epistle to the Hebrews begins with the astounding declaration that God, having spoken previously through his prophets, has now spoken in a definitive and climatic way through his very own Son, who has now, after his incarnation, death and resurrection, ascended into God's own presence.

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways," the apostle declares, "God spoke to our fathers through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by

the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.”

Hebrews begins, in other words, with the Ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven.

And indeed, the centrality and importance of the Ascension of Jesus is, in many ways, the primary argument of the entire epistle.

Jesus has gone into heaven, the apostle argues, fully human, in our flesh, and there he serves on our behalf as our high priest before God.

And because Jesus is in heaven, that, the apostle tells us, is where the real action is.

Heaven is the place where Jesus reigns. Heaven is the place where his blood is presented before the throne of God. Heaven is the place where Jesus stands as an anchor, holding us fast in union with God.

And this apostolic argument about the centrality of Jesus’ activity in heaven has a polemic quality, because you must remember, the epistle to the Hebrews was written during a time when the temple in Jerusalem was fully active.

Every day, in Jerusalem, sacrifices were offered for the sins of Israel. When the words of Hebrews were first written and read, the blood of sheep and goats were still being spilled, and the priests of Israel were proclaiming the forgiveness of sins based on the blood of those animals.

The temple in Jerusalem, remember, was magnificent. Its size was massive. Its beauty was overwhelming. It was truly one of the wonders of the ancient world.

You can understand if the earliest Christians looked around and compared their tiny, unimpressive worship services each Lord's Day in small homes and dark caves and empty fields to what was taking place in the Temple in Jerusalem each Sabbath day and wondered whether they had been right to abandon all that glory and beauty and power.

But the insistence of the writer to the Hebrews is that Jesus Christ, God's own Son had indeed entered Heaven's gates, and by powering out his Holy Spirit on those who were baptized in his name, he had united them to himself, thus drawing them into the very life of heaven itself.

And, as we find in the climatic masterstroke of the apostle's argument in our passage this morning, this means that Christian worship, no matter its outward appearance, is always, by the power and presence of the pentecostal Spirit, heavenly worship.

Look at the argument that runs throughout this passage.

*In verses 18-21, we read: 18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."*

Here the Apostle evokes the dramatic encounter between the newly freed people of Israel and their delivering God at the Mountain of Sinai, as we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning.

The emphasis in that Exodus account is, of course, the unapproachability of God. The people cannot even touch the mountain, let alone ascend it. They are kept away upon pain of death. Only Moses can go up on their behalf and experience the presence of God in his holiness and power.

But, now, a greater Moses has come. And in this ascended Jesus, the apostle is eager to announce, all of those who belong to him are safe before the face of God.

Indeed, as the apostle says, in our gathered worship you, beloved, you do not come to what may be touched...

*22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

So what do we come to when we gather for worship? Yes, we're just here in this sanctuary, it all seems perfectly mundane and normal, but what is really happening?

According to the apostle, when Christians gather in Jesus' name according to his command, we ascend to heaven itself. We come to the true Mountain of Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem itself.

In our worship we join with the innumerable angels in festal gathering, those heavenly creatures who live before the face of God and continually praise his name.

And in our worship, the apostle says, we are surrounded by the spirits of the righteous made perfect - that is, the souls of those who have died in Christ and have been gathered to heaven's courts as they worship and wait for the resurrection of the dead.

And of course, at the center of heaven's worship is God himself, the judge of all, and Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and the blood of Christ,

the blood that has made a safe path for us into God's holy presence - for without that shed blood sprinkled over us we would die.

This, the Apostle argues, is what takes place in Christian worship.

This is what happens whenever those who belong to Jesus gather on the Lord's Day to pray and sing and hear the Scriptures read and preached and eat and drink bread and wine according to the institution of Christ.

And it does not matter a whit whether this worship happens in a glorious cathedral or an empty field. Christian worship has taken place in catacombs, in shacks, on ships at sea, and in all kinds of sanctuaries built for that purpose.

And in every case, the Apostle is saying, that worship has been a real participation in the worship of heaven, with Jesus himself leading us in the praise of the Father.

This, by the way, is why the classical protestant tradition of the church has always emphasized a simplicity in gathered worship - the same kind of simplicity our own congregation practices - just hymnals and piano for singing, just simple prayers spoken together, just a normal human voice reading and preaching the scriptures - no videos, no screens, no elaborate rituals.

It's because the externals of our worship aren't themselves the point - they are simply the avenue by which we participate in the real thing - and the real thing is happening above, in heaven, where we by faith ascend every Sunday.

And the protestant tradition has always held that if the externals of worship become overly elaborate, with too many bells and whistles, too much noise and flashing light, then those externals of worship can actually give the impression to worshipers that *they* are what really matter - and

thus distract from the real thing which is taking place in the courts of heaven.

No, the Protestant tradition has always argued that you may not, you cannot judge Christian worship by its appearances.

For as long as it is faithful, as long as it is performed in accordance with the Scriptures, we believe that even the simplest worship service is a true participation in the worship of heaven itself.

And on this Pentecost Sunday, it is worth emphasizing that this miracle that takes place each Lord's Day in our worship is a work that is accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit, for it is the Spirit that unites us to Jesus and lifts us into his presence.

Calvin puts it this way: *"Let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space."*

In other words, though our worship appears plain and ordinary, it is the Holy Spirit who unites us to heaven's courts - it is the blessing and presence of the Spirit that makes our worship far more powerful than it appears to our physical eyes.

*28 Therefore, this Pentecost Sunday, as the Apostle says, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.